



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A STUDY OF THE THREE UNITIES IN SHAKESPEARE'S REPRESENTATIVE PLAYS

Throughout the ages there has been unceasing conflict between the individual and society. From the time when primitive group spirit was dominant this struggle has been obvious. A rationalizing element has gradually developed in opposition to the habitual and merely passive submission to custom and arbitrary authority. But, in spite of the great advance in individualistic conceptions, the struggle is not yet ended. Every aspect of modern life—economic, social, political, religious—reveals a contention between these two elements. Radicals, Progressives, Free-Thinkers, and Higher Critics exist alongside of Conservatives, Standpatters, and orthodox religious adherents. The issue still remains.

Many years ago this contention became extended in scope, reaching even the sacred realm of art. Society, representing evolutionary judgment, decried the capricious *ipse dixit*, and demanded for great art, law, government, tradition. The individualist responded, saying, "Rob art of its personality, and you take from it its most enduring, most transcendently beautiful, possession."

Now, of all arts the drama is most democratic. Yet even this has not escaped the individualistic and anti-individualistic strife. More modern tendencies have demanded larger freedom and initiative in opposition to the limitation and restriction of the ancient drama. There are still those with us, however, who, because of the greatness of the early forms of this art, demand a modern imitation of its lesser virtues.

The form of this early drama was a logical expression of the life of its founders—the Greeks. The classic drama, as found in Sophocles, for example, is exquisitely clear and simple and "austerely beautiful." An *Oedipus*, an *Antigone*, or an *Ajax*, still charms and delights us. Yet the very life such a play represented, the very nature of its production, made it comparatively limited in scope, with few actors and little change of scene. The fact that each play was one of a trilogy made the

length much less than that of a modern drama, and of necessity the action was strongly unified.

Later, Aristotle formulated his theory of the drama according to the art which he best knew—that of the Greeks. In so doing he laid down that controlling law which has been recognized as a necessary one throughout the ages—unity of action. He defined it as “an organic unity—an inward principle which reveals itself in the form of an outward whole.” It is opposed to plurality, but not to the idea of manifoldness and variety, and demands that the parts should be “arranged in a fixed order and structurally related so that none can be removed, none transposed, without disturbing the organism.” Then, with the Greek drama still in mind, he added, not as a definite rule but as a commentary on Greek art, “Tragedy endeavors so far as possible to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed that limit.”

At the hands of the French and Italians, with their eternal emphasis upon form and literary “mechanics,” Aristotle’s suggestion in regard to time was changed to a definite rule. Twenty-four hours was made the limit. Nor was this all. Accepting the desirability of “unity of action,” demanding as a consequence “unity of time,” they deduced still another “unity” law—that of place. This law demanded that the scene be laid in one place; or, if that were not possible, at least in one town or community. At the hands of these critics, then, formal perfection was to be attained, whatever the price. Individualism was entirely prohibited, and exclusive loyalty to tradition demanded.

As modern initiative developed, however, the wisdom of adhering to the last two of the three unities began to be questioned. Freedom of conception could not endure the arbitrary restrictions of “time” and “place.”

The best method of judging the relative merits of these two schools is probably to apply the pragmatic test. Can the individualist produce great art? No more certain criterion can be gained, then, than by a study of the representative plays of that greatest of all dramatists, William Shakespeare.

First of all, let us look at his great masterpiece, *Othello*. No

one can doubt that the author is here moved primarily by the action. Guided by his sure dramatic instinct, the conception of characters is indissolubly united with his conception of dramatic action. Every scene, every act, every episode, is totally controlled by the one idea of the drama. Each part is "structurally related so that none can be removed, none transposed, without disturbing the organism."

A single illustration may suffice. The early scenes, at the time of the appointment to the commission at Venice, reveal, first the setting and background of the story; second, the characters of the leading participants in the action; third, a suggestion as to the final outcome,—the statement of the exciting force. The same concentration, purpose, and logical coherence is maintained in each scene throughout the play. Take even the minor scenes from the drama and you will find the action retarded and confused, for each brings us one step farther toward the ultimate goal.

Unity of action, then, is maintained. But is the same true of the unities of time and place? We begin at Athens, and within a few hours are transported to Cyprus. A long journey is taken, but no definite allowance made for time. Still, we do not wonder; indeed, we fail to perceive it in the least, in the acted play. And why should we? We are living with Othello and Desdemona, and are not really ourselves. Since this ideal world is a mental one, place and time are simply products of the mind.

Again, within thirty-six hours after her arrival in Cyprus, Desdemona is smothered—that is, when we examine the play minutely, with the time element in mind. Yet many things imply the logical estimation of long time. Frequent illustrations of this implication recur. One or two may serve to indicate it.

At the close of the first act we are left with the impression that it will require some time for Iago to accomplish his purpose. He says that his plan is "*after some time* to abuse Othello's ear." Later, in Cyprus, the commission having arrived but two days before, Bianca speaks to Cassio and chides him for having been "a week away" from her. And then, when Othello and his company have been scarcely three days in Cyprus, Lodovico

arrives, announcing that Othello is to return and that another official is to succeed him.

Many critics have sought to explain such seeming inconsistencies by the "historic" and "dramatic" time theories. Elaborate discussions of fine points have been formulated showing just why Shakespeare planned "long time" implication here and there, while in reality comparatively rapid action is maintained. Like many another genius, Shakespeare suffers from the admiration of too devoted critics. Without seeking for some hidden purpose in this treatment of time, may we not accept, as the simple and probable cause, an individualistic indifference to such minor rules and precepts? Absorbed in the maintenance of unity of action, he let other matters take care of themselves. Frankly surrendering all devices to cheat the senses, he wrote for a bare stage with no scenery, the place to be pictured as your imagination would have it.

The same was true of time. Knowing that it, of all things, is most compliant to the imagination, he found it even less troublesome than the element of place. A simple law of psychology proclaims the fact that months and years which pass enlivened by little action may, in contemplation, be compressed into the briefest space, while an equal time marked by many events seems to stretch out indefinitely.

In this play, then, allowing the imagination to care for place and time, unity of action becomes his one controlling principle.

When one considers the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries, the boldness of his initiative in disregarding the unities of time and place becomes more striking. Although Marlowe placed unprecedented emphasis upon freedom, there were not lacking writers such as Sackville, Peele, and Greene, who demanded exclusive adherence to classical tradition. Ben Jonson, the great protagonist of the classic school, defiantly opposed the romantic spirit and employed the dramatic unities in all of his plays.

In sharp contrast it is interesting to notice Shakespeare's further treatment of the unities as it appears in *Romeo and Juliet*. We again find the time element somewhat confusing. Obviously, however, the old interpretation of this unity as meaning that the time must be compact within a single revolution of

the sun is utterly disregarded, for the action probably occupies about five days. But when we see the play acted, as Shakespeare intended we should, the time element becomes very vague and leaves no distinct impression. We infer at first thought that the action occupies months and years rather than days. And why are we not troubled by our lack of definite knowledge in this regard? We are living with Romeo and Juliet. When our emotions are being "purged through fear and pity" there is little need for sordid time conceptions.

As to place, Shakespeare almost adhered to this unity law, as liberally interpreted by having the action centre round Verona. But Romeo was later banished to Mantua and Shakespeare desired us to see him there receiving the misconveyed message from Friar Lawrence. Of course we could, after the old Greek plan, have received word of this through a messenger or some other *deus ex machina*. A chorus might have asked of someone unusually well versed in the affairs of the heavens and the earth, "And in what wise did the evil news swoop down upon him? Declare to us, who share thy pain, how it befell."

But who cares to resort to such a formal, arbitrary makeshift when it is possible for him to behold Romeo at Mantua with his own eyes? And Shakespeare, the artist, gave us a truly artistic portrayal—by taking us to Mantua. Then we accompany him eagerly back to Verona with no sense of rebellion because the unity of place has been disregarded.

The third and great unity—that of action—is not so obviously maintained in this play as in *Othello*. The plot is not quite so direct and uncomplicated, since there are two strands of the story—the feud between the houses and the love of Romeo and Juliet. Nevertheless, the action is strongly unified, as can be shown by a few illustrations. The feud makes necessary the secret marriage of the lovers; it brings about the death of Tybalt at the hands of Romeo; the killing of Tybalt in turn gives rise to Romeo's banishment; the feud again causes Juliet to be powerless to speak of her former marriage when Paris begins his suit;—this in turn causes her to drink Friar Lawrence's sleeping potion and ultimately brings about the death of herself, Romeo, and Paris, whereby the feud is ended and the houses reconciled.

There is but one plot, then, and no strictly irrelevant matter, since even the short humorous bits serve their purpose of dramatic relief. Consequently this play, also, maintains unity of action.

One of the most difficult plays to analyze with reference to the minor unities of time and place is the tragedy of *King Lear*. Unlike most of Shakespeare's plays there is not even a hint as to time, not a single reference being made to it throughout the whole play. Critics have estimated that the play itself covers ten days, with an interval between Act I, scene 2, and Act I, scenes 3 and 4, of something less than a fortnight, with the possibility of an interval of a day or two between Act IV, scene 2, and Act IV, scene 3. This would make the longest period, including intervals, that can be allowed for this play, one month. This can be but a matter of interpretation and inference, however, for there is nothing which can give definite proof of it. To the average reader the time seems much longer. Such intensity of action, such multiplicity of events seems to demand many months or even years.

As to place, that, too, is uncertain. We are quickly transported from palace to palace, from castle to heath, from the British to the French camp. But we scarcely realize it. Never do we stop to ask, "Now just where is this palace, camp, or heath situated?" We do not know, and *we do not care*. Evidently Shakespeare himself thought it of little consequence, since he made no effort to reveal it to us.

In *King Lear*, again, we have a somewhat complicated plot, but essential unity is maintained. The several strands of the story,—Lear, Goneril, and Regan; Edmund, Gloucester, and Edgar; Goneril, Regan, and Edmund; the war story; Cordelia and King Lear,—are all inextricably bound up together, and all move toward the final tragedy. Consequently the unity-of-action law is not disregarded.

In another of Shakespeare's masterpieces, *Hamlet*, unity of place would have been maintained had not the scene been changed in the fourth act from Elsinore to a plain in Denmark. As to time, again there is evident confusion. In reality the whole action probably occurs within a week or ten days, but, as

usual, many things give us the impression of long time. Two or three illustrations will reveal this more clearly.

Horatio is introduced in Act I, scene 1, as one familiar with all the affairs both in and outside of Denmark. He has evidently been in Denmark some two months since he came to attend the funeral of the late king. In the next scene, however, he is represented as greeting Hamlet for the first time after a long absence.

Again, we always think of Hamlet as a procrastinating youth, continually hesitating and postponing his work of vengeance. But, as we have seen, the entire action takes place in a week or ten days. Hence there cannot be so great delay as we have been accustomed to think. The length of time is seen to be largely estimated by impression. If a week or ten days does not seem sufficient to us for Hamlet's development of character, in what a predicament would Shakespeare have placed us had he observed time-unity and given us an action lasting twenty-four hours!

Although the plot of this play appears somewhat complicated in comparison with some of Shakespeare's more simple and direct dramas, as usual, essential unity is maintained. The affairs with Polonius, Ophelia, Fortinbras, and Laertes are not mere underplots but are identical with the central theme of the play—Hamlet's work of vengeance.

Did Shakespeare, then, ever observe all of the three unities in a single drama? In only one, *The Tempest*. The time here is compressed into three hours, the only place mentioned is an island and the water surrounding it, the plot is simple and uncomplicated. Yet even here it may be safely conjectured that Shakespeare did not restrict the drama to the unities. Rather more probable is it that the story itself appeared best adapted to a portrayal in which the three unities were employed. Likewise, had Shakespeare lived in our age and presented a modern drama he would undoubtedly have employed the unities as unconsciously used in *The Servant in the House*, or Ibsen's *Ghosts*, simply because they would have been best suited to such a representation as these plays demand.

We are fond of regarding Shakespeare as a very "un-

knowable" and reticent creature who never expressed his own thoughts by putting them in the mouths of his characters. But would it be illogical to think that it is not Hamlet but Shakespeare himself who gives the instructions to the players in Act III, scene 2, of *Hamlet*? Would it be even more illogical to call this Shakespeare's sane view of all art?

"You must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it [the play] smoothness. . . .

"Be not too tame neither, *but let your own discretion be your tutor*: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, *that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature.*"

Thus, Shakespeare let his "own discretion be his tutor," paying little heed to the demands of arbitrary form and refusing to be bound by the shackles of conventionality.

Though in him we admire this attitude of independence, probably very few of us are yet ready to adopt it ourselves. We mediocre ones stand somewhat appalled before fearless initiative. We could never achieve the boldness of a Shakespeare or an Emerson and say, "Leave me alone. Do not teach me out of Leibnitz or Schelling and I will learn it for myself." And well it is that we do not advocate such a doctrine, since for ordinary man it would lead to little less than anarchy.

But Shakespeare was not limited by the infirmities of mediocrity. His artist's soul was a certain guide which kept him aloof from mere impressionistic whims, and hence he did not "o'erstep the modesty of nature." Likewise his sure dramatic instinct caused him to reject mere cold, passive formalism which is "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null—dead perfection, no more." It was his supreme privilege to bless the world with living, vital art.

Such individualistic power reminds us of a man who lived many centuries before the age of the Elizabethans. Unusual bodily strength rendered him independent of all laws of physical restraint. When it was sought to confine him as other men were imprisoned, Samson "took the doors of the gate of the city of Gaza, and the two posts, and went away with them bar and

all, and carried them up to the top of an hill which is before Hebron."

Likewise Shakespeare, unparalleled in intellectual strength, took the bars, posts, and doors of the city of tradition upon his shoulders, and bore them to the top of another hill—the great mountain height of genius. The restraints and rules to which other men were subject became obedient to his will.

B. LOUISE SCHAFER.

Hillsdale, Michigan.